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BIRDS ABOUT A COUNTRY HOME IN WINTER

BY ALICE EDGERTON.

Our home is ideally situated for bird study. There is a woodlot of several acres to the east, the trees on that side coming down to the house. In this wood is a small alder swamp surrounded by thickets of ironwood. To the north and west is another wood which joins a neighbor's woodlot. Together they form a wooded area of considerable size. In the rear, and near enough to shade the house, are three black locusts, an ancient shellbark hickory, and five red and sugar maples. Thus we are literally in the woods.

When I became interested in bird study I did not need to lure them to the yard, they were already there and very much at home. One who could use a saw and hammer fashioned for me a lunch counter from a weathered board, which we fastened in a small prune tree twenty-five feet from the back porch. On it we put seeds, crumbs, and later corn which all seemed to like except the English sparrows — they had been too partial to the crumbs. We also tacked suet to one of the locusts trees and our guests were bidden to the feast. They came readily and fearlessly and my fun began.

My plans were well laid: the suet was for Woodpeckers, Nuthatches, Titmice and Chickadees; the corn for Cardinal Grosbeaks, Juncos, Tree Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and Blue Jays. But how they went awry, those plans! Blue Jays varied their corn diet with suet. Tufted Titmice, while clearly preferring the suet, came freely to the corn if other birds were at the suet, and I could not discover that the Nuthatches preferred one above the other. This is where the plans were wrong. The Nuthatch is a seed eater also though it gets more credit for the destruction of the grubs it finds under the bark. As for the Juncos and Tree Sparrows, they came not at all, but chose the weed seeds in the garden. They eat crumbs and grain if I throw them on the ground.

The numerous Downy Woodpeckers come to the suet by

twos and threes and singly. If other birds are there they are soon driven away and the Downies occupy it by right of conquest.

On occasions a Hairy Woodpecker comes also, but it is sometimes absent for weeks and never comes regularly.

Last winter a female Red-bellied Woodpecker came frequently and this winter I see both birds. They are very noisy and more timid than the Downy Woodpecker which seems afraid of nothing.

At the lunch counter all birds but the Cardinal have puzzled over what to do with the large grains of corn. Cardinals, by virtue of their large bills, take the grains whole. They are the only winter birds that come to the yard quite alone, and having no other bird to warn of the cat's approach, they are nervous and timid. I have recently noticed that a male Cardinal roosts at night in an old shack hardly larger than a dog kennel which the children use in summer for a playhouse. He comes at sunset for corn, signifies his displeasure, if the counter is bare, by a few sharp chirps and then flies to the open window of the playhouse. I think it likely that it is the same bird that spent the summer nights in a fruit tree near the house. We always knew when he came by the loud chirps he gave as he flew into the thick leaves.

When the Tufted Titmice come to the counter they bring all their relatives and the Chickadees. They are often to be seen on the loosely shingled roof of the sugar-house working around the shingles. It leads me to suppose they have hidden things in the roof. Their solution of the corn problem is to hold the grain to the limb with one foot while it is pounded to pieces. They call, "Peter-Peter" if the day is fair and dine together in brotherly love.

Not so the Blue Jays, however. We all know they have their little prejudices. Among themselves they live in harmony while it is winter. As the grain of corn is too large to swallow whole it is taken in the bill by one end, the free end is then pounded off and wasted. The Jays sometimes carry away corn but I have never seen where it was hidden.

The Nuthatches also do this. I have watched others do it in the autumn but not in winter.

The Nuthatches manage the corn very well indeed. The grain is carried to one of the locusts where it is wedged firmly in a crotch in the bark and hammered to pieces. This reminds me of their habit of putting beech nuts into crotches of bark to be hatched open. One bird has its separate fork which it never fails to use. It will be a red letter day at Oakside when a Red-breasted Nuthatch comes to the feeding station in winter. So far I have seen them in spring or autumn only.

Sometimes there is a sudden shadow on the counter made by the wide wings of a Hawk. The two Hawks I see in winter are the Red-tailed Hawk and the Cooper Hawk, and I usually see one individual of each species throughout the winter. The Red-tailed Hawk that has been hunting over our pastures and meadows is remarkable for the brilliant red of its tail. I have not been able to determine just what this one lives on in the winter, but I rarely see it kill anything larger than a mouse. We did at one time, however, find a badly wounded Grouse which it had dropped as we frightened it away. The deep wounds made by the talons of the Hawk in the firm flesh of the Grouse testified to its strength.

The Cooper Hawk has ruined its reputation by coming too near the house and dieting on young chicken. There is a rapidly uttered, panic-stricken cry the Bob-Whites make when they are chased by a Hawk. I hear it often and register another complaint against Cooper Hawk.

My winter friend, the Screech Owl, I seldom see since it gave up its friendly habit of lodging in a hollow maple in the yard, but it has a remarkable voice and I hear it every night — also a larger relative whose voice I do not know well enough for certain identification.

The large number of fruitful beech trees I consider responsible for the covey of Ruffed Grouse that always winters in our woods. They come often to the thickets nearest the house and act out whole plays within the range of my glass. One sunny morning as a Grouse crossed the lane, a Hawk

screamed overhead and suddenly there was no Grouse at all, but only a spot in the road that was nothing but a pile of leaves and dust. When the Hawk had sailed over the pile of leaves took wings and flew into the woods.

I had heard for years a clear, far-reaching cry and wondered over it, before I made the discovery that it was the clan-cry of the Quail. At sunset from some fence corner a clear single-syllabled whistle goes forth, and is answered from far and near by the separated Bob-whites. If there has been no unusual scattering in the covey that day there is no curfew. It is to be heard every evening during the rabbit hunting season and I have wondered if the covey dispersed voluntarily for safety or whether it was frightened apart. The latter is the more probable conclusion.

The casual visitor to Oakside Farm I have not mentioned. Those observers who can go far afield can furnish larger and more interesting lists. My object was merely to tell of the birds to be seen from a farmhouse porch. It is a curious fact that my friend in the village sometimes feeds as many as five male Cardinals at once, while I never have more than one. This seems to me to indicate that we farmer folk who have excellent advantages for bird study, neglect them, and carelessly leave both the study and feeding of birds to the villagers. How shall we best serve our small friends?

Columbiana, Ohio.

COMPARATIVE PERIODS OF DEPOSITION AND INCUBATION OF SOME NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS.

BY FRANK L. BURNS

Very little seems to be known regarding the exact periods of incubation of our birds. Captain Bendire's observations appear the most extensive until recently when some attention has been given the subject by various observers, mostly incidental to the intensive study of a single nest or perhaps a colony of one species or another.